

# WITCHES

BY

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GRAHAMSTOWN  
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THE idea of witchcraft, as you will know, is not confined to any one set of peoples, but is distributed through many different races, cultures, and environments. It occurs among primitive peoples from Africa to the South Seas and from Asia to America. Its record among civilised peoples is only a little shorter. Everyone knows that Joan of Arc was a convicted witch. However, it is not always recalled that witches were still being burnt in Europe down to the age of the French Revolution. The last occasion was in 1782 in Switzerland.

My object to-night is to discuss witchcraft beliefs and witch persecutions as they appear from the standpoint of modern anthropology. Our science has learnt a great deal about witches since the pioneering days of Sir James Frazer and Edward Tylor. Besides collecting much more exact knowledge we have gained a far deeper insight into the social meaning of witchcraft.

It is pleasant to be able to say that some of the most notable advances in knowledge and understanding are owed to former holders of this Chair of Anthropology at Rhodes: to Professor and Mrs. Krige who studied witchcraft in the Transvaal among the Lovedu<sup>(1)</sup>, and to Professor Wilson who, with her husband, studied it in Tanganyika among the Nyakyusa<sup>(2)</sup>. My third and last predecessor, Professor Radcliffe-Brown, has been prudent enough to work only among tribes where there are no witches. But to him is due the great general illumination of principles and methods without which modern Social Anthropology could not have progressed as it has. I feel that it is a special privilege and honour to have him here to-night.

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(1) J. D. and E. J. Krige, *The Realm of a Rain Queen*.

(2) M. Hunter, *Reaction to Conquest*, Ch. 6; M. Wilson, *Good Company*, Ch. 5 and p. 198 ff.; "Witch Beliefs and Social Structure"; *American Journal of Sociology*, v. 56, January 1951, p. 307; *Keliskammahock Rural Survey*, v. 3: Social Structure, Ch. 6.

In what I say to-night, I shall be drawing together some of the important points about witchcraft that have been made by various anthropologists studying particular tribes; and I shall also be outlining some general conclusions which have been suggested to me both by the literature and by my own fieldwork.

When one starts to think about witchcraft, commonsense suggests the first question how it is that ideas so absurd, fantastic and often horrible have been so widely distributed in place and time. At the same time, since witchcraft ideas are widespread without being universal, one wants to account for their absence too. Some of the most primitive peoples on earth, including Australian aborigines and Bushmen here in South Africa, do not believe in witches.

One thing is clear: the witchcraft idea must be related to something real in human experience. Occurring at so many different times and places and cultural levels it cannot be lightly dismissed as a frill on the edge of human fantasy. Social Anthropology, then, is concerned with finding out what is the basic reality underlying witchcraft ideas. When I say reality I do not mean physical fact. Even the most optimistic fieldworker does not expect to see anyone flying on those well-known broomsticks. The kind of reality we are searching for is social and psychological. The witchcraft belief, and the persecution of witches, are a response to social and psychological strains. The more exactly we can identify those strains, the better we can hope to understand the response.

I shall first have to say what witches are. This is not a simple matter. Until Evans-Pritchard's classic work on the Azande there was little serious effort to distinguish witchcraft from sorcery or to isolate it from black magic generally. But as we have to choose a working concept, I would suggest that the essence of the witchcraft idea is simply this: People believe that the blame for some of their sufferings rests upon a peculiar evil power, embodied in certain individuals in their midst; although no material connection can be empirically demonstrated between those individuals and the ills they are supposed to have caused.

The witch then is held to be a person in whom dwells a distinctive evilness, whereby he harms his own fellows in mysteriously secret ways. To this central mystical idea each society adds its own embellishments.

One of the fascinations of these mystical embellishments is the recurrence of identical details in astonishingly different surround-

ings. Shakespeare writing in 17th century England about mediaeval Scottish witches makes them recite a list of creatures that would be just as appropriate to witches in primitive Africa. Or again: the Pueblo Indians in Mexico say that witches go round at night carrying lights that alternately flare up and die down<sup>(1)</sup>; exactly the same thing was said to me in Western Kenya by the Bantu tribe among whom I worked.

One could quote many of these minute parallels. It is not my task to-night to deal with them as such nor to interpret their symbolism. But perhaps it may help us to discern order in the symbolism if we list the major elements that seem to be common to witchcraft myths nearly everywhere:

First, the myth defines a category of persons who may be witches, and states how they can be recognised by particular signs. Witches are practically always adults, very often women, and apt to spring from witch families. They may bear physical stigmata—either external, like a red eye or a Devil's mark, or internal, like a snake in the belly or a special witchcraft substance. Personally they are often reserved, stingy, and quarrelsome.

Secondly, the myth tells what sorts of misfortune can be caused by witches. Often these include natural calamities such as death, sickness, drought or plague. However, the context of the misfortune is usually more significant than its intrinsic nature. Witches typically send particular and unaccountable blows that seem somehow out of the common run.

Thirdly, the myth states that witches turn against their own neighbours and kinsmen; they do not harm strangers or people from far away.

Fourthly, they work from envy, malice or spite, against individuals, rather than in pursuit of material gain as such. Sometimes they are "just greedy," or they may have no conscious motive at all.

Fifthly, witches always work in secret, and especially at night.

Sixthly, witches are not entirely human. Their evil power is something *sui generis*, quite unlike ordinary ways of dealing injury such as force or poison. It may work upon its victims immediately, that is to say without the use of any instrument at all. The witch only has to wish you harm, and the harm is as good as done. A witch then is a human being who incorporates a non-human power. When a myth refers to snakes or other objects in

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(1) E. C. Parsons, *Mitla, Town of the Souls*, p. 131.

the belly of the witch, it seems to be reflecting this notion. Other myths reflect it by saying that witches are possessed by spirits or devils, or that at night they forsake human form and turn into were-creatures.

Seventhly, witches reverse all normal standards. They particularly delight in "unnatural" practices such as incest or bestiality; they eat their own children, they dig up corpses. They go naked instead of clothed; they excrete in the middle of the dwelling. Even when they knock on your door they stand backwards; or when they ride on baboons, as the Pondo witches do, they face towards the tail. In Christian countries witches repeat prayers or the whole Mass in reverse order.

Lastly, witchcraft is always immoral. At best it is disapproved; at worst it inspires horror like other so-called unnatural practices. Witchcraft properly so-called cannot be justified<sup>(1)</sup>.

So much for the myth of witchcraft. But though Social Anthropology is concerned with myths and beliefs, it is even more directly concerned with actions, with what men actually do and not how they live. Malinowski made popular the saying that a myth provides charter for action. We have to study the witchcraft system as a whole, the actions as well as the myths, the entire complex of beliefs, attitudes, and activities. And having done this we should try to relate it to other social systems, and to find out what part it plays in the working of society as a whole.

Whether anyone ever tries to be a witch and actually perform witchcraft is a question that has to be separately determined in each society we study. In some primitive tribes the answer seems to be yes. More often there is no positive evidence, but even so things sometimes happen in the field that shake one's scepticism. Like Evans-Pritchard among the Azande<sup>(2)</sup>, I have seen among the Gusii at night suggestive lights moving near my camp, lights that died down and flared up again exactly as the witchcraft myth alleges. Gusii say that witches produce this effect by raising and lowering the lids of covered fire-pots which they carry with them.

However, Social Anthropology only claims to analyse behaviour that has been properly observed, and observed with some

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(1) Exception may be taken to stating this as a general rule in the light of instances such as the Heiban and Tira, cited by Nadel, *The Nuba*, p. 157 and 202. Personally, I would prefer to define witchcraft as something essentially immoral. See also M. Wilson, *Good Company*, p. 97, note 2, about her substitution of the term "defender" for "defender witches."

(2) *Witchcraft, Oracles and Magic among the Azande*. Clarendon Press, 1937.

regularity. This condition which does not as yet apply to witchcraft practices, does of course apply to the counter-action that people take against witches. Even if some individuals do try to be witches, the witchcraft power itself is surely imaginary, but the power of the idea regularly inspires people to defence or counter-attack. This therefore is the kind of action that field-workers have observed and analysed. We can analyse it irrespective of whether its referent is real or unreal, much as we could analyse a church service while leaving the existence of God an open question.

Let us start by distinguishing two broad categories of action against witches. These categories correspond to the two elements in the nature of the witch, who is non-human and yet human. Insofar as the witchcraft power is non-human, one may try to nullify it by antidotes as mystical as itself. One may recite spells or wear amulets or put down medicines. This is a kind of duelling in the realm of fantasy, a duel between two equally imaginary forces. Judged by rational standards it cannot produce any concrete effects, as distinct from psychological ones. But because the wielder of witch-power is also a human being, one may also try to evade or control him as a human being. This is another kind of duelling, not mere fantasy but working social effects that are plain for all to see. For example, among the Gusii it is quite common for whole families to leave their homes through fear of witches; or the self-styled victims might seek reconciliation or pick quarrels, or start whispering campaigns, or complain to the elders. Or they might call in a "smeller" which is the name they give to professional witch-detectives; in former days a witch who had been duly smelt out might be put to death, but nowadays the use of criminal sanctions against witches is not allowed by the Kenya Administration.

When we consider all the activity that is directed against supposed witches, the question must be asked when or why people start going to all this trouble: what events or situations give them the impulse to start fighting this imaginary menace. It is clear that the stimulus is a feeling of unease or anxiety; but this statement needs to be analysed further. After all, many events and many situations regularly create anxiety, but not all of them bring the witchcraft idea into operation. Death and sickness, for instance, always create anxiety, but the emotion can often be dealt with by the ordinary routine responses. The routine response to a death is a funeral, the routine response to a sickness is medical treatment. The idea of witchcraft is invoked on occasions when these routine responses alone do not give emotional satisfaction.

Events are creating a special anxiety when they are termed unnatural, or uncanny. They are seeming to run counter to the ordinary course of things. The anxiety fastens on to the question of what deeper causation can have underlain the observed event. Among ourselves, we know that some deaths arouse a special anxiety so that we feel impelled to investigate their deeper causation. It is not enough to bury the man who got drowned in the river. We may also insist on finding out why he got drowned,—whether he jumped in, whether someone pushed him in, or whether it was just an accident.

The witchcraft idea is commonly invoked as a concept for explaining the deeper or indirect causation of events which seem unnatural. Evans-Pritchard has brilliantly analysed Azande witchcraft beliefs in this light. Of course, the sphere of the "unnatural" is defined differently in every culture. The Azande explain very many deaths by witchcraft: they think it is unnatural to die unless one is very old. Other peoples explain things differently.

Within a given culture, we have also to reckon with the individual point of view. Subjective factors may largely influence the tendency to suspect witchcraft in particular cases. You may think that you have an unnatural illness; I may see nothing odd about it. And the observed facts can nearly always be given a different twist by a person with a different point of view. This was nicely illustrated for me by an old Gusii man. "Suppose there is a cattle plague," he said. "Nearly all of my cattle die, but my neighbour loses only a couple of beasts. I wonder whether he has bewitched me; it was strange that I should lose so many, and he only so few. Now that neighbour has seen that I am still able to lead out my plough with a pair of strong oxen, but the plague has killed just those two animals of his that he always used for ploughing. He says to himself how strange it is that I can still plough and not he. Perhaps *I* am the one who has bewitched *him*."

Even if only for reasons like these, the anthropologist would hardly expect to be able to predict by rule of thumb just what events will lead to the suspicion of witchcraft and what will not. But there is another limitation too. Witchcraft is usually not the *only* mystic agency that can be suspected of sending peculiar or unnatural misfortunes. Many a primitive universe is peopled with numbers of mystic agencies whose hand may be suspected behind any unusual event. Among the Gusii, for instance, strokes of bad luck may be interpreted as the work of witches, but they may also be attributed to sorcerers, or to the evil eye, or to ancestor spirits, or to broken taboos, or to perjured oaths, or to



ritual uncleanness or perhaps just to luck, "the luck of God," as they say. A different kind of remedy or protection will be used according to which of these agencies is held responsible.

## II

If we want to understand the functions of the witchcraft system as a response to human sufferings and anxieties, I think we have to consider how it fits into a people's entire cosmology, or view of the universe, or philosophy of life. I am especially thinking of what we ourselves call the problem of evil. For example, among those mystic agencies which I have just enumerated, the Gusii regard some as fundamentally just or good and others as fundamentally unjust or evil. Ancestor spirits belong to the first category: they are like angry fathers—always right; they do not trouble people except those who deserve to be troubled. When a Gusii thinks that his bad luck was sent by ancestor spirits, he is construing it as a moral sanction called down by some misconduct of his own. Witches belong to the second category; they are always wrong. When a Gusii thinks that his bad luck was sent by witches he is construing it as unprovoked aggression against himself. The former is a response in terms of guilt and atonement, the latter in terms of resentment and counter-attack.

Take by way of contrast the cosmology of the Andaman Islanders. They too have a cult of ancestral spirits, but unlike the Gusii they find it no blasphemy to accuse the spirits of doing wrong. As Radcliffe-Brown has shown us, when a death occurs among these people the anger is directed against the spirits and may find expression in violent railing against them<sup>(1)</sup>. This contrast must obviously be relevant to the fact that the Andamanese do not believe in witches and the Gusii do.

Again, among the Tallensi, as Fortes has shown, the ancestor and earth cults can on the whole deal adequately with most social or psychological tensions. The idea of witchcraft, though it does exist, does not rank as equal to these in the cosmology: it appears mainly as a mixture of superstition and folklore<sup>(2)</sup>.

The Gusii witchcraft belief helps to maintain their picture of the moral universe. By blaming witches they escape the need or temptation to blame spirits. The spirits can remain good because the witches are bad. (Incidentally, the Gusii have no answer to the question why these good and just spirits fail to protect virtuous men against evil witches. That problem is more directly tackled,

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(1) *The Andaman Islanders*. Free Press, p. 300

(2) M. Fortes, *The Web of Kinship among the Tallensi*, p. 33 ff.

among others, by the Venda in the Northern Transvaal, who say that before a witch can harm anyone the protective ancestor spirits must be caught off guard<sup>(1)</sup>).

There are some cosmologies into which the concept of witchcraft does not fit at all, because they represent everything that happens as being fundamentally right, proper, or natural. Some religions, for instance, teach a Job-like submission to a divine will which brings about everything and is always just. With similar effect, rationalism teaches that everything may be interpreted as the outcome of natural causes. In neither of these idea systems, if consistently held, is there any room for the witchcraft idea. Witches can only have place in a cosmology that admits to the possibility of things going wrong, that is, departing from the natural and the moral order. We ourselves, in spite of Christianity and Rationalism, appear to admit this possibility up to a point, as when we speak of "uncanny" luck, meaning contrary to natural order. or of "unfair" luck, meaning contrary to moral order.

I have been discussing how the witchcraft belief can serve to protect the picture of the moral universe, but as we know it can also protect many other ideas and beliefs. If you have cultivated your fields in the usual way, you may blame a witch for the failure of your crop, and so be saved from the thought that accepted farming techniques might be at fault. If your illness does not respond to treatment, you may blame a witch, and so be saved from doubting the worth of medical knowledge and practice. The witch system can save other belief systems from being deluged with the blame which might otherwise often deservedly fall upon them. It gives a channel into which the blame can be turned more conveniently. The power of the witch is conceived as something that can put a spoke into any wheel; this helps one to assume that, but for witchcraft, all the wheels would always be turning smoothly.

When we ourselves speak of natural disasters such as drought or epidemic, we sometimes call them "Acts of God," meaning that no human being can be held responsible. Primitive peoples who attribute these disasters to witches are taking the opposite view; they are blaming human beings, and they may even be asserting that those human beings caused the disaster just by willing it. I think that this notion, bizarre to us at first sight, begins to look much more familiar if it is translated into slightly different wording: let us put it that the witch is debited with the moral responsibility. That is a thing distinct from the immediate physical

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(1) H. A. Stayt, *The Bavenda*. O.U.P. 1931, p. 275.

agency. If so-and-so has been wishing for me to suffer, he seems to me morally guilty when I do suffer, no matter what the direct physical causation may be. It is but a short psychological step from attributing moral guilt in this sense to attributing clear responsibility; one is only invoking the common principle which Freud has called "the omnipotence of thought."

### III.

So far I have been discussing the witchcraft idea as a cosmological device, accounting for sufferings that people cannot or will not explain otherwise, and providing a pattern of action that the sufferer may follow when his misfortune makes him particularly uneasy. But the witchcraft idea has of course quite a different kind of social importance as well as this. It is a force in social relations; it is something that can break up a friendship or a marriage or a community; it is a banner under which people hate, denounce, and even kill one another. That is the aspect in which I now want to discuss it.

When we speak loosely of witches being tried or condemned we mean of course that individuals are being tried or condemned as witches. The witch does not exist in his own right; it is the judgement of society that creates him. Society creates the image of the witch, and pins this image down onto particular individuals. If we want to find out what individuals are chosen to fill this unenviable role, there are two ways to go about the inquiry. The first is to try to define a general category of witches. Natives define such a category when they say that all individuals with pythons in their bellies or with red rims round their eyes are witches. We might hope to substitute a more scientific formulation: we might, for instance, be able to show what personality types are most commonly associated with the role of witch in a given society.

The second way, which has been used to such excellent effect by the Kriges and the Wilsons, is to define witches in relation to those whom they bewitch. Instead of asking "who are the witches?" in vacuo, one asks how witches stand related to their supposed victims or their actual accusers. A witchcraft case may end in the uprising of a whole community, but it begins as a duel between two antagonistic individuals, or even as a one-sided mistrust. Our question then is: In a given society, who is most likely to accuse whom?

Thanks to the admirable field-work that has now been done in many parts of the world, we should be able to answer this question with some confidence. Two general rules seem to emerge

from the literature. The first is that witches and their accusers are nearly always people close together, belonging to one neighbourhood community or even to one household. This principle is expressed in the witchcraft myth by the notion that witches cannot harm you from far away but only from close by. The second rule is that a witchcraft accusation nearly always grows out of some personal antipathy or hostile emotion. In the myth this is expressed by saying that witches attack where they feel dislike or envy.

In the typical case, then, the alleged witch is a neighbour and perhaps a kinsman of the accuser who has not been getting on well with him or her. I think that most of the apparent exceptions to this rule, if analysed, turn out not to relate to genuine witchcraft but to other phenomena such as sorcery or the evil eye. There are a few societies where the rule does not hold, but even these exceptions may be of the sort that prove the rule, as Kluckhohn has suggested in his studies of the Navaho<sup>(1)</sup>.

It is by now well established that witchcraft accusations may be significantly frequent in one or more specific relationships. For example, among many African peoples it is specially common for a woman to accuse her husband's other wife of being a witch. Among the Mesakin in the Southern Sudan, Nadel found that the accusation commonly occurred between a man and his maternal uncle<sup>(2)</sup>. As Nadel has suggested, frequencies of this kind should be interpreted as pointers to weak spots in the social structure.

We must conclude that witches and their accusers are individuals who ought to like each other but in fact do not. The two elements in the situation—the demand for a positive sentiment and the inability to provide it—are equally essential to the picture. Painful tension arises because one individual cannot feel towards another as society expects him to feel. By the standards of Society one ought to get on well with one's kinsman or neighbour, one's co-wife or maternal uncle. If in fact one cannot get on well with him or her, the situation may become tense. When such a tension becomes insupportable, the only ways to resolve it are reconciliation on the one hand or rupture on the other. Marwick has shown that among the Cewa accusations of witchcraft serve

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(1) C. Kluckhohn, *Navaho Witchcraft*; C. Kluckhohn and D. Leighton, *The Navaho*.

(2) S. F. Nadel, "Witchcraft in Four African Societies," *American Anthropologist*, v. 54, 1952, p. 24 ff.

the purpose of rupturing or blasting away relationships that have become insupportable<sup>(1)</sup>.

When someone starts to argue that someone else is bewitching him, this notion may serve to bring to a head the tensions and strains of their relationship. It gives a pretext for quarrelling. There is no law under which you can denounce a person for being personally distasteful to you, but you can denounce him on grounds of witchcraft. The witch idea then is a device that enables people to dress up their animosities in an actionable guise—in the guise of an offence committed against themselves.

Although the condemnation of witches may seem arbitrary in a deeper sense, it is nevertheless carried out in due legal form. The witch's guilt is not taken on trust but is determined by some supposedly objective standard. We know of many magico-religious tests for guilt, such as ordeals, oracles, or diagnosis by magical specialists, and of judicial forms, hearings by a court or a body of elders. We know that even when a supposed witch is set upon by an angry mob and beaten or stoned to death, as used to happen in many African tribes, this is a judicial execution and not an uncontrolled lynching. The crowd is the public executioner in a non-centralised society: it is not the judge as well.

It has been observed, again by Marwick, that people accuse one another of witchcraft when they are prohibited from expressing their aggression in other ways such as physical brawling or going to law<sup>(2)</sup>. From my experience among the Gusii, I would qualify this by adding that people who have both possibilities may still prefer to accuse each other of witchcraft, rather than to pick a legal quarrel, because the witchcraft case has a different objective. Legal cases among primitive people are usually meant to smooth out relationships by patching up quarrels over specific issues. However, among the Gusii and perhaps in most other societies the parties to a witchcraft case probably do not want to be reconciled. What they want is an excuse for rupture. In a witchcraft case the thing at stake is not a specific legal issue but the whole tone of the relationship.

It is an extremely important question what kinds of sanction are used against a witch: when will the suspect be only pursued as a private enemy by his self-styled victim, and when will he be hounded down as a public enemy by community or state? For this largely determines the degree of danger to life and liberty.

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(1) M. J. Marwick. "The Social Context of Cewa Witch Beliefs," *Africa*, v. 22, 1952, p. 126.

(2) *Loc. Cit.* p. 129.

Let us consider how the matter is handled by the Gusii. Among the Gusii, for reasons I shall mention later, there was and still is a great reluctance to publicise witch cases. The first recourse is to private magic. If this does not give satisfaction, the easiest and best way to resolve the tension is to break off relations altogether. For where there is no active relationship there can be no active danger, either of being bewitched or of being suspected. If a man suspects his wife, then he will divorce her; if he suspects his sweetheart he will stop courting her; if he suspects his neighbour he may leave the neighbourhood. By these and similar personal adjustments, rupture is achieved without calling in public sanctions or even trying to enlist public opinion; in fact, secrecy is usually a great object. But there remains an alternative way of achieving rupture, and this is by an open legal challenge, which constitutes a direct appeal to public opinion. If the challenge is successful, the witch is liable to be pursued with the whole weight of public sanctions, ending in his death or banishment; at best he has become a "known witch," a person ready to be blamed and hounded down in any future private or public calamity. If the challenge is not successful, the challenge itself has at any rate dramatically registered the quarrel as open and bitter, since witchcraft is one of the most serious accusations a Gusii can make against another.

Modern administrations and governments in Africa have tried to lessen the social perils of the witchcraft belief by refusing to recognise witchcraft as a criminal offence. In that case it is not permitted to try people for witchcraft in the public courts nor to use criminal sanctions against supposed witches. Witchcraft cases are therefore kept down to the private level. They are duels between A and B, not public issues between A and the community.

This solution has undoubtedly removed the most dramatic dangers to life and liberty. But it brings other problems in its train. The public condemnation and execution of a witch, however repugnant it was, may be considered to have served a useful function from one point of view. It was cathartic; it purged the whole community of certain anxieties for the time-being. They had found the public enemy who made things go wrong for all of them; they had destroyed him; they could all breathe more freely. But now that the anxieties cannot be purged by a few great public witch-hunts, they have to find outlet in countless little private hunts. Every sufferer has to find his own witch. It is less dangerous to be thought a witch, but there is much more likelihood of being thought one.

Since the accusation of witchcraft can be such a dangerous weapon, we have to enquire what safeguards there are against its being used too freely. We all feel that a society that gives excessive prominence to witchcraft must be a sick society, rather as a witch-ridden personality is a sick personality. This is confirmed by anthropological studies which in several cases have shown an increase of witchcraft phenomena in communities undergoing social breakdown. The native peoples of South Africa during the difficult phase of urbanisation provide several cases in point.

In a normally stable society the witchcraft system is effectively controlled. It admittedly provides a vent for hatreds and anxieties that society cannot repress, but this remains after all a controlled outlet: the frequency or severity of convictions is somehow kept within bounds. It should be anthropologically valuable to compare the ways in which different societies achieve this control. To-night, however, I shall only single out one aspect. In many societies, including the Gusii, the weapon of witchcraft accusation is given a double edge. There is good reason to think twice before you denounce your enemy as a witch, for the denunciation may very well recoil upon your own head.

The literature shows how common it is for witchcraft cases to be ambiguous in this sense. *Prima facie* the signs that point to a person's being a victim of witchcraft can equally well point to his being a witch himself. Let me give a few examples: I take them from the Gusii, but they would fit many other peoples too. If you have been out alone in the night you could well have been attacked by the witches whom you saw prowling in the dark. But to the person you met you looked just like a prowling witch yourself. If you have a peculiar illness, it may mean that you are being bewitched; but it may mean that someone whom you yourself have bewitched is using revenge magic against you. If you have become unusually prosperous, the witches will probably be attacking you, because they always go for people whose good fortune they envy. On the other hand, the kind of person who grows prosperous while all around him are poor is very likely to be a witch himself. If you marry into a witch family, or otherwise consort with known witches, who is more likely than you to become their next victim? On the other hand, why did you ever take up with such people if you were not yourself a witch? If you have left your home and gone to settle in a far-away place, you may say that you fled from witches who threatened you at the old home. But other people may say that you fled as a witch fearing detection.

It may sound paradoxical to say that witches and their victims look much the same in the public eye, but it makes good sense if we remember that the matter really at stake is a sensation of distrust or hatred. There is not much essential difference between the statement "I hate X," and the statement "X hates me." Even if the hatred is not actually mutual, the one who feels it will probably project it onto the other party. As Lienhardt puts it, a man who easily hates is also one who easily believes himself to be hated<sup>(1)</sup>.

At any rate, among the Gusii, as among many other peoples, it is almost as dangerous to accuse a witch, or to defend yourself against a witch, as it is to be a witch. The three kinds of activity merge into one another. The act of defending oneself involves a dangerous kind of black magic called Mosira, so deadly that its use against anyone, except a witch, is considered anti-social. Mosira, like witchcraft itself, produces death or sickness. In view of this, the facts in a given case can always be interpreted in opposite ways. Each party can say that his own sufferings are due to his enemy's witchcraft and that his enemy's sufferings are due to his own Mosira. A's interpretation of the evidence will thus exactly contradict B's. Besides, if a person uses Mosira and has great success with it, people will suspect that he is probably a witch too. They will feel that if he can defeat other witches so triumphantly he must also have been well versed in their tricks himself.

To accuse a witch in public is dangerous, if only because the ordeal has to be taken by both parties; the ordeal can turn against the accuser and show that he himself was really the witch. But even if things do not get to this stage, it must be remembered that slandering a person by wantonly calling him a witch is in itself a very grave offence. The Gusii say that this kind of back-biting is just as bad as witchcraft itself; and in this they are quite logical, since both witchcraft and back-biting contain the same element of turning disloyal to one's own neighbour. Nowadays, though the government tribunals refuse to try witchcraft cases as such, they are often called upon to try cases of back-biting in this technical sense.

#### IV.

I want to end by stating some general conclusions about the reality underlying the notion of witchcraft.

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(1) G. Lienhardt, "Some Notions of Witchcraft among the Dinka," *Africa*, v. 21, 1951, p. 317.



The figure of the witch, clearly enough, embodies those characteristics that society specially disapproves. The values of the witch directly negate the values of society. Typical witchcraft myths attribute to witches many kinds of vices including those that are considered unnatural or specially horrible. Lienhardt has written of the Dinka witch as one who "embodies those appetites and passions in every man which if uncontrolled would destroy any moral law"<sup>(1)</sup>. That is well said; and it reminds us that the witchcraft myth has after all a certain educative or normative function. In the words of Kluckhohn, "Witchcraft lore affirms solidarity by dramatically defining what is bad"<sup>(2)</sup>.

The witch myth then recognises an opposition of moral values; an opposition of good and bad, right and wrong, proper and improper, sinful and righteous. The witch is always on the wrong side of the moral line, he is a figure of sin incarnate. However, I think that another or a more particular kind of opposition is also vitally involved. I mean the opposition between "us" and "them," between in-group and out-group, between allies and foes. The witch is the figure of a person who has turned traitor to his own group. He has secretly taken the wrong side in the basic social opposition between "us" and "them." This is what makes him a criminal and not only a sinner.

As we have seen, the witch is conceived as a person within one's own local community, and often even within one's own household. All human societies require a basic loyalty between members of the small co-operative and defensive group. The local community, the family, the household, all in one way or another make this demand of loyalty as a categorical imperative. Persons who stand in these intimate relations must on the whole work together, not against one another, if the group is to survive as a group. In one word they have to pursue common or joint interests. Injury to one should be felt as injury to all. But the witch is conceived as a person who withholds this elementary loyalty and secretly pursues opposed interests. He wants to spoil what his fellows most want to preserve: their life, health, strength, and fertility; their children and their livelihood. He wants to blast their crops and dry up the milk of their cattle. These fundamental interests of life, strength and subsistence are legitimately attacked by enemies in open warfare, but the witch is not fighting open war; he does not come from outside like a raider; he dwells within the group and destroys by stealth. The witch is the hidden enemy within the gate. He eats away like the maggot in the apple.

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(1) Loc. cit. p. 317.

(2) C. Kluckhohn and D. Leighton, *The Navaho*, p. 179.

If we look upon the witch figure in this light as the arch traitor, the type of the fifth column, I think that several facts about witch beliefs are more readily understood; the main features all seem to fit readily into this pattern.

In the light of this principle we understand why the witch is regarded as not altogether human, why witchcraft is a so-called unnatural offence. The person who denies those basic loyalties to family and community outrages the sentiments, on which all social life must rest. The witch has denied the social nature of man; that is as much as to deny human nature itself. No wonder if the myth represents witches as eating their own children or consorting with hyenas and corpses. Anyone who can turn secret traitor to his nearest fellows is surely capable of all other unnatural sentiments too.

In this sense witchcraft is exactly parallel to incest. As Radcliffe-Brown has pointed out<sup>(1)</sup>, the great social danger of incest is that it threatens to overthrow the sentiments on which the family depends for its organised existence. It is entirely logical, on this showing, that witchcraft and incest both rank as unnatural offences, and that often both are attributed to the same individuals.

Further, we understand why witchcraft is always secret, and always associated with the night. The witch is essentially a hidden enemy but an apparent friend. If he did not appear to be one of ourselves he would not be betraying our trust. In the day he looks like anyone else; only at night does he reveal his secret inclinations. As the Lovedu say: "You eat with him, yet it is he who eats you"<sup>(2)</sup>.

Above all, we understand why witchcraft is treated as a criminal offence, even in those primitive societies where criminal sanctions otherwise hardly exist. By his treason the witch has forfeited his rights as a member of the in-group; he has outlawed himself; he has pursued the interests of an enemy; then let him be treated like an enemy, killed or put to flight.

We know that some peoples punish repeated petty theft within the community in the same manner as witchcraft—in fact they make these the only two offences punishable by death. The element of disloyalty provides the link between these two offences, which to the western minds seem so different. The petty thief who steals from his own neighbours is like the witch secretly attacking the interests of his own group.

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(1) *African Systems of Kinship and Marriage*, ed. by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and D. Forde, Introduction, p. 70 ff.

(2) J. D. and E. J. Krige. *The Realm of a Rain Queen*, p. 263.

I think that the same principle helps to some extent to explain how society chooses the individuals who fill the role of witches. The disloyal person will be sought among those who have failed to give public demonstrations of their loyalty. Accordingly the witch is the woman who fails to give tokens of goodwill to her neighbours: she is reserved, uncommunicative or stingy; a withholder of gifts, or of hospitality, yet greedy for the good things that other people have.

Possibly we might also use the concept of a withheld loyalty to help to explain why witches are so often women. It would seem appropriate enough in those patrilineal societies where the new wife is brought in to join the household and community as a person from an outside group. There is a demand for the woman to merge interests and loyalties with those of her marital home, but she still keeps in her heart some private personal loyalties to her home of origin. She is thus the person who most readily fits into the image of an enemy within the gate.

What I have been saying relates to the witches of primitive society, but I think it applies equally well to certain phenomena of the civilised world. For we too are often found in situations where our basic values and basic loyalties seem threatened; and we too are apt to seek out the enemies within our gates.

In civilised societies other demands for over-riding loyalties have been added to those of the family and community. We are divided not only into groups but also into parties. We stand or fall by our ideologies, in a manner quite foreign to the primitive society with its general ideological uniformity. Civilisation brings with it an opposition of sects; of orthodoxies and heresies; of rival religions and political "isms." Civilisation still has its witches, but it is more apt to call them traitors to a cause, or an idea, or a way of life. It was consistent that for so many centuries in Christian Europe the witch was identified with the heretic or the devil worshipper, and persecuted as such by the Church. Given the idea of basic opposition between Christ and the devil, the witch would be conceived as one who had secretly left Christ and gone over to the devil. In our day we also have a feeling of fundamental cleavage, between the Communist and the Non-Communist world. When people in one of these camps start looking into corners and under beds to find hidden enemies who secretly sympathise with the other camp, we get what is very properly called a witch hunt. The classic examples of witch hunting in modern society are the purges of the Communist Party in Soviet Russia and other communist countries. The witch figure in the communist purge is a person who has turned traitor in this basic opposition, by harbour-

ing secret bourgeois sympathies or secret leanings towards capitalism. He is identified and by "confessing" at his trial he takes the blame for things he could not possibly have caused. He is purged, and the group has reaffirmed its solidarity.

It is equally proper to call McCarthyism a witch hunt, as distinct from a simple political persecution. It is a witch hunt because it too goes out and meets its selected victims much more than half way. It takes people who have not yet committed any crime, and tries by all means to fit them into the image of traitors to a cause, the American way of life.

Witch hunting, then, goes together with a feeling that basic sentiments, values and interests are being endangered. A society in order to feel secure must feel that not only its material interests but also its way of life, its fundamental values, are safe. Witch-hunting may increase whenever either of these elements seems gravely threatened. Among primitive peoples, as we have seen, an increase in witch-hunting is apt to occur both when natural disasters threaten their material interests, and when culture contact threatens their way of life. If witch-hunting is a reaction to a society's feeling of insecurity, it seems unlikely to disappear from the civilised world at present, unless we can remove the radical feeling of insecurity which haunts our nations today.